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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today urged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to raise concerns about limitations on religious freedom and related human rights in Kazakhstan with Kazakh Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev, during his visit to Washington this week.

“Secretary Clinton should engage Foreign Minister Saudabayev on the urgent need to reform his country’s human rights record, including freedom of religion or belief,” said USCIRF chair Leonard Leo. “The Kazakh government’s failure to permit the exercise of fundamental human rights, including religious freedom, is counter to the interests of the United States in promoting stability in Central Asia.”

Issues of concern to USCIRF include two articles in the current and draft Kazakh Administrative Code that violate international standards on freedom of religion or belief. These articles set penalties, including possible short-term detention, for individuals who take part in, lead, or finance an unregistered religious community or a social organization, as well as individuals who conduct “unlicensed missionary activity.” Another matter of concern are parliamentary plans to consider in late 2011 a new religion and non-governmental organization law, despite the Kazakh Constitutional Council’s rejection of amendments to the country’s religion law in February 2009. In addition, during parliamentary deliberations on that draft law, the Kazakh government ignored and refused to publish the legal analysis it had requested of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Moreover, there are reports of official preparations for a new state body to oversee religious affairs nationwide.

“Kazakhstan did not institute the human rights reforms it promised before it took up the chairmanship of the OSCE,” added Mr. Leo. “Indeed, one of the leading human rights defenders, Evgeny Zhovtis, is currently imprisoned despite glaring legal irregularities in his prosecution. USCIRF urges Secretary Clinton to press for the implementation of specific reform measures, including voiding the recent conviction of Evgeny Zhovtis and opening a new, transparent investigation into his case, including due process guarantees. Without real progress on all these issues, the U.S. should not agree to an OSCE summit in Astana, which the Kazakhs are reportedly pressing for.”

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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